

# HOME FROM THE WAR

BY STEVE KISTULENTZ

In the midst of an August heat wave, on a Monday when the temperature topped out at 100 degrees, we buried my father in section 36 of the Arlington National Cemetery, just down the hill from President Kennedy's eternal flame. My clearest memory of those months found me standing over my father's gravesite as the jets in missing man formation thundered overhead. I wore a gray gabardine suit on its way to being too small in the stomach and shoulders, a white shirt that belonged to my father, and the watch my grandmother had given him as a high school graduation present 48 summers before. As a squad of soldiers fired their rifles into the humid afternoon, I stifled the urge to raise my hand in salute.

I have worn the watch on just a handful of occasions. The funeral. My senior prom. A summer wedding in the Cook County, Illinois courthouse. But the watch, an unremarkable Bulova tank, spends most of its time sequestered in a black leather jewelry box on my dresser, among orphaned cufflinks and a pair of Tiffany sterling silver collar stays — it's fragile and unreliable, yet except for his World War II dog tags, it remains one of the few totems of my father that I have kept, having long since jettisoned his first sergeant's uniform, the brass nameplate from his Pentagon office. I have the watch; my sister has in her possession his medals, a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart, along with the flag that draped his casket, the emblem of thanks from a grateful nation.

My father died in the late summer of 1988, when *Magnum, P.I.* had just finished sputtering through its final season, including a season-opening episode where it was unclear whether or not Magnum was actually alive. I remember the seventh-season cliffhanger where Magnum, having been shot for what seemed like the hundredth time during the show's run (the actual tally, according to a fan's web site, is eight) has a near-death experience; the episode ends with Magnum walking towards the light, to the saccharine sounds of John Denver's "Looking for Space." And though I was a passing fan, I did not watch any of the last season; not the episode where Magnum learns that his assailant, a North Vietnamese general with two decades' worth of grudges, has been set free, nor the two-hour finale where Magnum is reunited with his young daughter and somehow regains his commission as an officer in the Navy.

The only thing I remember watching that fall was baseball: one game, the opener of the 1988 World Series.

The Dodgers were my father's team, and rooting for them that year was an improbable dream, an act of faith much like Thomas Magnum's undying support of the Detroit Tigers. Of course, the Tigers of the Magnum era were a juggernaut, constantly in contention and setting a record by opening their World Series-winning 1984 season with a record of 35-5. The Dodgers, on the other hand, had been out of Brooklyn for 28 years and still played the heartbreaking brand of baseball they had mastered in Flatbush. There were precious few championships in Chavez Ravine. The Dodgers excelled in one thing; they came close a lot.

Built out of role players and castoffs, the 1988 team featured an ace pitcher, Orel Hershiser, who would literally throw his arm out at the beginning of the next year, and an offensive leader, outfielder Kirk Gibson, whose body seemed to crumble a piece at a time. By the October playoffs, after Hershiser managed to start three games of a classic series victory over the New York Mets, then come out of the bullpen to save a fourth, the Dodgers felt like nothing more than a good story, a team of scrappy underachievers that made it farther than they ever should have.

On the night of the first game of the World Series, I stumbled to the Green Leaf Café, the only bar in my small Tidewater town that had both a television and a license to sell what the James City County sheriff liked to call *beverage alcohol*. Watching the game wasn't on my mind. Baseball was a distraction, a waste of the too-humid summer Saturday afternoons of my

childhood, watching the *NBC Game of the Week* with Joe Garagiola and Tony Kubek. My father sat in his recliner, eating cheese puffs, washing them down with cans of whatever beer had been on sale that week at the 9th Street branch of Central Liquors.

So I wasn't disappointed to find that the television at the Green Leaf did not work. I didn't think much about baseball, until around 10:30. That's when I heard my little voice. To quote a phrase used often in the voiceovers that gave each episode of *Magnum* their dramatic arc, *I know what you're thinking, and you're probably right*. Something told me to go home, take out a beer, turn on the television. Some voice.

My apartment at the time was a converted garage with a small galley kitchen and a rather industrial-looking bathroom. I'd convinced the landlord to allow me to build a wall which divided the room in half, making a living room just large enough for a couch, and a footlocker, just large enough to hold my television, a serviceable 13-inch model, purchased yet not yet paid for with the college student's entry-level Sears credit card. The set had barely finished warming before I heard the Dodger Stadium crowd greet the gimpy-legged Gibson with a standing ovation as he limped to the plate to pinch hit. Before Gibson's first swing, my little voice told me something else, too. Turn on the radio. I found the game just as Gibson stepped out of the box to compose himself, then stepped back in, looking for Dennis Eckersley's back-door slider. The static faded and on the CBS radio network I heard Jack Buck's call—the words that became almost as famous as Gibson's game-winning home run—*I don't believe what I just saw*.

A day later, highlights of Gibson's shot to right field, intercut with scenes from Robert Redford's film version of *The Natural*, would show just what a Hollywood ending baseball and real life could combine to produce. Like Jack Buck, who'd spent his life around baseball as the voice of the St. Louis Cardinals, I didn't much believe it either. But I should have trusted my little voice. *Magnum* would have been rooting for Gibson, too. After all, he'd started out as a Detroit Tiger.

It's difficult to label myself as more than a casual admirer of *Magnum*. It's easy to dismiss the series as camp, a paean to the Hawaii of garish shirts and *Magnum's* ridiculously short Ocean Pacific shorts; but it is precisely the lack of pretense that makes Tom Selleck's private investigator a worthy and enduring hero. He lived by a distinct warrior's code, and like many Vietnam

veterans, Magnum sometimes found it difficult to adapt the warrior's role to that of a peacetime society.

My appreciation for the show seems more of a guilty pleasure, something akin to my taste for SweeTarts or Lik-m-Aid Fun Dip. Though the movie studios routinely rob their vaults to rework far less successful television series into major motion pictures, *Magnum* exists in stasis; a rumored theatrical film starring George Clooney turned out to be the wishful thinking of fans, and only in August 2004 did Universal Studios finally manage to begin the release of the show on DVD. Perhaps that is because *Magnum* never inspired fanaticism, at least nothing of the sort that marks a series like the original *Star Trek*, where hundreds of rabid aficionados can rattle off the name of any episode where Captain Kirk wore his green wraparound shirt. Still *Magnum* managed six consecutive years in the top 20, despite spending much of its run on CBS scheduled opposite the NBC comedy juggernaut anchored by *The Cosby Show*.

*Magnum* debuted in December 1980, with a two-hour pilot that quickly established its ethos; Magnum, a Naval intelligence officer, had grown tired of the rigors of military life, and as he told various characters throughout the show's eight-year run, he was nearing 40 without ever having been 20. So he resigned his commission and finagled a job as a security expert on the estate of mystery novelist Robin Masters, a jet-setting figure whose voice, in the show's first four seasons, was provided by Orson Welles. Magnum's foil, played by John Hillerman, was the hilariously stiff and formal British major domo of Masters' Oahu estate, a former British army master sergeant and MI6 operative named Jonathan Quayle Higgins.

This back story distinguished *Magnum* from most of the one-hour police procedurals of the era. Magnum's first case as a private investigator (he loathed the word "detective")—the death of a fellow Naval intelligence officer accused of smuggling cocaine—led to the discovery that a French commando (played by a menacing and nearly silent Robert Loggia) once left behind by Magnum's SEAL team had turned narcotics smuggler. So Thomas Magnum had a past, but it was neither as the disassociated Vietnam veteran of Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, nor the single-minded jingoist of John Wayne's *The Green Berets*. From the first episode where he was forced to shoot an old friend in a grimy men's room at the Honolulu airport, Magnum was an undeniably complex character.

*Magnum* the series built on this past, and Tom Selleck's Magnum became a World War II-type antihero—self-aware, flawed, somewhat cynical, yet always tremendously loyal—think William Holden in *Stalag 17* or *Bridge on the River Kwai*. He skated by on good looks, charm, and a raised eyebrow or knowing wink; he added beers to an ongoing tab at the King Kamehameha Club (run by Orville Wright, the gunner on Magnum's SEAL team) and was ferried around the islands by Theodore (T.C.) Calvin, the team's chopper pilot.

In *Magnum's* fourth season opener, an episode titled "Home From the Sea," we learned the origin of Magnum's tradition of spending the Fourth of July alone; he spends the day in silent recollection of his father, killed in action during the Korean War. Magnum plans a long workout, paddling back to the estate after T.C.'s helicopter drops him miles out, but his surf ski is capsized by a passing pleasure cruiser, and Magnum struggles to stay afloat, treading water for nearly 24 hours, in danger of being carried out to sea by the currents of the Molokai Express.

While he's adrift, Magnum recalls the day his father taught him to tread water, timing him on the very watch that Magnum would inherit upon his father's death. One of the episode's last scenes is of a young Magnum at his father's grave, saluting in a John-John Kennedy manner, the bulky Rolex dangling from his wrist. It's the same watch, of course, that the older Magnum uses to time his ordeal in the water, the watch Magnum wears through most of the show's eight seasons. Only when Magnum's three sidekicks each sense that something has happened to Thomas do they attempt a rescue, with Higgins eventually jumping into the swells of the Molokai Channel and pulling Magnum to safety.

A few anecdotes, then, about my father, the soldier. Where Magnum played the saxophone, my father played the trumpet, was a founding member of the Washington Redskins marching band. Magnum came from a line of Navy men, his father and his grandfather before that. My father and all his brothers served in the Army, three in Europe, two in the South Pacific.

A bit of my father's back story as well. An infantryman in World War II, a draftee, ferried to England as a passenger on a troop transport, the U.S.S. West Point; under its previous name, the America, the same ship had delivered my grandparents, émigrés from a forgotten village in the Carpathian mountains, to Ellis Island in 1914.

The nickname of my father's division, the 95th Infantry, came from their German opponents, who called the advancing Americans the Iron Men of Metz. Metz, a fortified city annexed by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War, had withstood the attacks of countless armies since the fifth century. A head-on assault would have been fruitless. During the battle for Metz, most of the division snuck through the woods at night, bootlegging their way around the city, while a small task force remained behind to convince the Germans of an upcoming frontal attack. The regimental commander, a Texan colonel named Samuel Metcalfe, labeled it the *hidden ball trick*. Metz fell in less than a week, but only after hand-to-hand combat within the fortress walls ousted 300 German holdouts. My father took a few pieces of shrapnel, to the calf, the left knee. And the victory division (named for the Roman V in the 95th's division insignia) began its drive across the Saar River into Germany.

During the march east towards Berlin, my father somehow managed to keep, and type, a brief diary of those last few months, a timeline of the division's travels. A typical entry from November: *supplies and mail arrived 11/03. 379th Infantry makes a hundred kilometers in trucks, bivouacked near the banks of the Moselle*. I have this diary, about ten pages single-spaced. I have the rosary he carried in the left chest pocket of his M65 field coat. His combat infantry badge. The prayer book, in English and old Slavonic, that contained the liturgy of the Byzantine Catholic church. I have these things, but none of the stories. Except in the vaguest references, my father rarely spoke about any of it. Not about the battle for Metz, or the crossing of the Saar River into Germany, and the counteroffensive before the Battle of the Bulge. Not about the Bronze Star and Purple Heart he won that winter, the medals kept in his dresser, still in their presentation cases.

"Did You See the Sunrise?," the third season's two-part premiere, is perhaps *Magnum's* best installment. The scene: Magnum drinking a longneck Old Dusseldorf beer, seated at one of the round patio tables of the King Kamehameha Club. He taps his team ring against the glass bottleneck; the ring is a two-bar cross, the cross of Lorraine, a symbol of French resistance in World War II. Magnum waits to hear a story from Nuzo, a former team member, who has arrived in Hawaii with a spectacular claim: Ivan, the KGB colonel who once captured and tortured Magnum and his team for months in the

Vietnamese hamlet of Doc Hue, is out to settle a score; Magnum and his men are the only escapees from Ivan's custody.

"Sunrise" added more to Magnum's back story—as part of a Navy SEAL team, Magnum, his pilot T.C., and two cohorts, Nuzo and Cookie, were held captive for three months at a makeshift POW camp—and combined the particulars with the very real struggles of Vietnam-era veterans suffering from delayed stress. In one episode, we learn that Rick, played with unusual understatement by the gregarious Larry Manetti, was not an original member of the team; he replaced Cookie, murdered by Ivan at Doc Hue. We learn that Thomas was a POW. But mostly we learn how little Magnum, T.C., Rick and their fellow veterans talk about anything that happened in Southeast Asia.

Yet Nuzo has ulterior motives, part of a complex scheme set in motion a dozen years before in the jungles of Vietnam. And Ivan apparently is after Magnum; he assassinates Mac, another of Magnum's former Naval intelligence colleagues, with a car bomb that destroys the show's signature red Ferrari. Before Mac turns the ignition key, he raises his head to ask Magnum, "Why don't we go up to Pali Lookout? The sunrise ought to be amazing." The plot, an ingenious melding of *Stalag 17* and the John Frankenheimer version of *The Manchurian Candidate*, leaves Magnum to face an unthinkable dilemma.

The episode climaxes in a final confrontation between Magnum and Ivan, after Ivan's cover identity as a Bulgarian diplomat has been blown and the Colonel has been declared *persona non grata* by the State Department, a response that isn't good enough for Magnum. He acts out of loyalty, to his dead mates Cookie and Mac, to his team member T.C. (an unwitting pawn in Ivan's plot), but mostly out of loyalty to a soldier's ideal. Magnum pulls a gun, and Ivan gives Magnum his definition of the soldier's code. "I know you, Thomas. I know you better than your own mother. I had you for three months at Doc Hue. You could shoot me, if I was armed, and coming after you. But here," he says, waving his arms at the expanse of jungle, "like this? Never. *Dasvidaniya*, Thomas."

Magnum lowers his gun to his hip, and Ivan turns to walk back to his car. Magnum asks, "Did you see the sunrise this morning?" And when Ivan answers yes, Magnum raises his gun and fires once. The episode ends with a muzzle flash. For the remainder of the series, no character mentions the events of Doc Hue, or the name Ivan.

In the panic of the march on Berlin, a displaced person approached a small refueling convoy being directed by a young sergeant named Kistulentz. He came close enough that my father drew his pistol. The man stopped, raised his hands, asked my father in Slavonic, “*Po nasomu?*” Meaning, “Are you one of ours? Do you speak my language?”

My father nodded. There was never a simple answer to the question of his identity. *Po nasomu* meant the man who asked the question was Ruthenian, from the foothills of the Carpathian mountains. An area conquered at the beginning of both great wars. Ethnic Slavs, once part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. The question meant “Who are you?” By the end of the war, the Ruthenians had no answer to the question. They were neither Russian nor Slovak. It meant simply that he’d recognized my father as a man dislocated from his own past.

The refugee threw down his threadbare wool coat, begged from my father a pocket knife, which he used to cut open the lining of his topcoat. From near the hem, he extracted a yellowed envelope. He told my father, in German, “Here are my papers,” and produced a baptismal certificate from a Russian Orthodox church in the Pocono mountains, just 20 miles from my father’s hometown of Freeland, Pennsylvania.

Later that afternoon, the men of the 379th battalion, 95th Infantry, rounded up the local displaced persons and put them on a truck for repatriation. At gunpoint. As the truck pulled away, headed east to the Russian sector, my father watched as the man made the sign of the cross, in the manner of the Orthodox church, right shoulder before left. Even though the man was American, an infantry sergeant could do nothing.

I once asked my father if he knew the man’s fate. The grim look and the silence meant that he knew the answer, but he never offered details. Retelling this story a few months before his death, my father paused and said, “I could have done something. Something more.” And finally, “He was one of our people.”

The episodes that truly sparkle, ones where the moral sides are most clearly drawn, all add to the explication of Magnum’s history. A sense of duty permeated most of Magnum’s adventures, but like the William Holden characters Magnum himself admired, his sense of duty was never blind. His loyalties became personal, and that was part of the show’s magic. Magnum’s



sense of duty sometimes meant punching a Marine colonel, or breaking his old uniform out of mothballs to impersonate an officer, or bribing his pal MacReynolds with a box of jelly doughnuts. The show lasted 162 episodes over eight seasons, but the six two-hour installments, all but one gravitating around the people or places Magnum knew in Southeast Asia, give the most insight into the relationships between Magnum's loyalties and his complex past.

In the two-part episode "All for One," Magnum and his team, joined by Higgins, return to Cambodia in search of a rumored POW based solely on the word of a long-time antagonist. "All for One" became a good example of the show's surprising humor; when former Green Beret Tyler McKinney arrives at Robin Masters' estate, he tells Magnum, T.C. and Rick that he's just been to an execution. Rick asks, "Whose?"

McKinney, played with cynical gusto by Robert Forster, answers, "Mine."

T.C. answers, "Well I guess somebody messed up then."

Magnum's loyalty, to Rick and T.C., and to all the soldiers he served with in Vietnam, means that he joins McKinney the next morning on a plane to Cambodia. He does all this despite the fact that McKinney once led him into an ambush. A doublecross is almost certainly in the works in Cambodia; Rick takes a bullet and nearly dies; Higgins and Magnum are held prisoner briefly by a sadistic Viet general—laid out in summary, it all sounds maudlin, the trope of a Chuck Norris movie. Yet by the time "All for One" reached the air, Magnum had been on for almost 100 episodes; we expected Magnum to take the longshot odds, even understood that Higgins, a subject of the Crown, believed that no man should have been left behind. We'd already had years to learn who these characters were, and despite the cantankerous nature of their relationships, we could trust their word as their bond.

In the nearly twenty years since my father's death, it occurs to me that we are not much of a family anymore, especially not in size, spread out as we are across the Midwest and South, pulled here and there by the strange confluences of our various careers and loves. And because we come from a family that never talked, we don't know each other all that well. At the holidays, we make lists of the presents that we want and feign surprise when

they arrive. We don't talk that much about my father, having either given up or settled our claims against him years ago; there are still questions that I'd like to know the answers to, but I don't ask. That's out of respect, too, for the fine World War II veteran my aging mother married a couple of years back. But this year, I'll put another season of *Magnum* on DVD on my Christmas list, and when I get it, I'll set aside a quiet weekend to run through my favorite episodes.

And I hope to spend the Fourth of July alone, the way I have most of the years since my father died. On this most recent Fourth, I thought of my father, some 30 years home from his war, during the summer of 1976. The others have dissolved into the non-specific mists of time, but that Bicentennial was the last Fourth of July I can remember spending with him; he stood in front of the barbecue, longneck beer in one hand, tongs in the other, turning over foot-long hunks of kielbasa as he choked from the smoke of the grill and the cigar clenched in his teeth. Later that night, we used his cigar to light bottle rockets and roman candles, sending a fusillade out over our suburban cul de sac. I could have plugged myself into a similar scene this past summer, but instead I stayed behind, watching a handful of expatriated Americans explode their smuggled fireworks over the still-chilled waters of a central Ontario lake. Children ran towards the water, a border collie and an Airedale barked warnings from the rocks at the shore, chasing them back when they strayed into too-deep waters. At the end of the day, the sunset reminded me of the inconsequential praises of a Neil Young song, *big birds flying across the sky*, and by the light of the children's sparklers, I sipped a gin and tonic before lowering myself into the lake, crawling yards out beyond the rocky point, wanting to see how long I could stay afloat.

